

FROM RECEIVER TO REMOTE CONTROL: THE TV SET

Sept. 14 through Nov. 25, 1990



Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution

Exhibition conceived and organized by Matthew Geller

THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

A LOOK AT THE TV SET

One role of art museums is to collect, preserve, and exhibit works of art. Another is to help us understand who we are as individuals and as a society by looking at the culture that we produce and which in turn shapes us. In the twentieth century this includes mass culture—industrially produced material intended for mass consumption. One of the most influential mechanisms of mass culture is television.

While each of us may have our own favorite television programs, as well as criticisms of the content of TV, we tend to pay little attention to the television set itself. *From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set* asks us to shift our gaze from the TV screen and consider the TV set as an object in the home. What can the history of television set design tell us about the roles TV plays in our lives? What can the ways we incorporate TV into our homes reveal about our families, our relationships, and the culture in which we live? How have developments in TV technology affected the ways we experience a sense of community?

"I can imagine no greater scientific accomplishment than the broadcast of sight...When peoples of the earth can hold instant converse with each other and at the same time behold each other's faces, the world of tomorrow will become indeed a friendly world in which many of our present-day ills will vanish."

Grover Whalen, President of the 1939 New York World's Fair

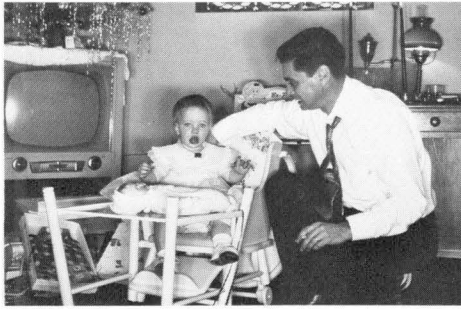
Why was television invented? In its early days, manufacturers positioned television within the history of great scientific advances—a product of Western progress and a tool for its continuation. TV was promoted as an extension of the body

that would do for the eyes and ears what the automobile had done for feet. No claim seemed too extravagant to describe its potential. Portrayed as an aid to global communication and an instrument of global conquest, television represented another step forward in the mastery of time and space.

Yet the utopian rhetoric of television promotions was not matched by television sets developed for the consumer market. For example, the technology for interactive or two-way television had existed since the 1920s. But this potential remained largely unrealized. Exploited in early marketing campaigns to garner support for the medium, it was ultimately incompatible with other socioeconomic agendas. As soon as television became a viable consumer product, governmental regulators stepped in and consolidated broadcast power in the hands of a few large companies. Ostensibly, their aim was to establish quality standards and protect consumers. But the decision also dictated television's fate as a primarily mercantile medium and prohibited unmonitored uses. One of the many stories that this exhibition tells is how social forces condition technological developments.

TV's strategic location in the home and its economic dependence on commercial advertisers made it a home appliance that could be used to sell other appliances and consumer products. Viewers were encouraged to compare their lot with that of TV characters and to identify with game show contestants who were constantly engaged in dramas of consumption. In the postwar years, TV became a critical link between industrial society and personal life.

A TV CHRONOLOGY



1921 First home radio sets go on sale in the U.S.

1926 RCA, GE, AT&T, and Westinghouse, leading manufacturers of radios and televisions, join together to form the first television network, National Broadcasting Network (NBC).

1927 Columbia Records institutes the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Radio manufacturers begin selling mechanical TV kits (complete assembly required).

1928 27 television stations go on the air in the U.S. using mechanical cameras. However, within two years only one survives the Depression.

1929 First radio broadcast rating service, Crossley's Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting (CAB), originates the concept of "prime time."

1936 NBC conducts experimental all-electric broadcasts in New York City. Programs originate from Radio City and are transmitted from the Empire State Building.



1939 David Sarnoff, President of RCA, introduces all-electric TV at New York World's Fair. Franklin D. Roosevelt becomes the first president to be seen and heard on TV.

1940 Condensed version of the opera *I Pagliacci* is broadcast in New York.

1941 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) permits TV commercials. One of the first ads consists of the NBC network's test pattern in the form of a Bulova clock face. The image remained on screen for one minute while the second hand made its sweep.

1942 FDR bans commercial TV due to threat of war in Europe. Radio factories are diverted for military use. Television technology is used to develop radar.

1943 Network TV begins with NBC transmitting sports telecasts to stations in New York and Philadelphia.

FCC orders NBC to divest itself of one of its radio networks. NBC Blue becomes the American Broadcasting Company (ABC).



1945 With the war over, RCA begins mass producing TVs, licensing patents from Philo T. Farnsworth.

NBC, CBS, ABC, and DuMont begin TV program services.

1946 10,000 U.S. households own television sets. By 1948 this number will climb to one million; by 1955, 35 million; and by 1976, 150 million or 98% of all U.S. homes.

Early TV commercials take the form of product demonstrations on sets simulating home environments.

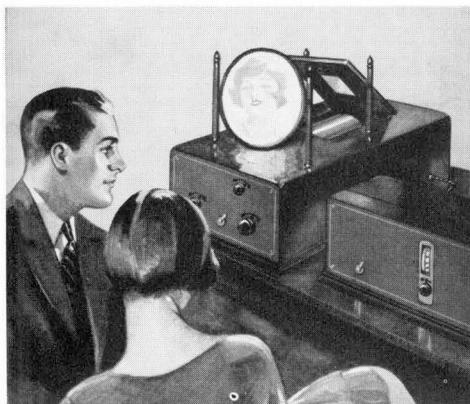
1947 DuMont airs interracial dancers on *Look Upon a Star* and is barraged with angry protest calls from white viewers.

The first family situation comedy, *The Goldbergs*, goes on the air.

1948 First cooking show, *To the Queen's Taste*, is broadcast.

1949 The Nielsen Ratings Service begins using sampling techniques to measure television viewership.

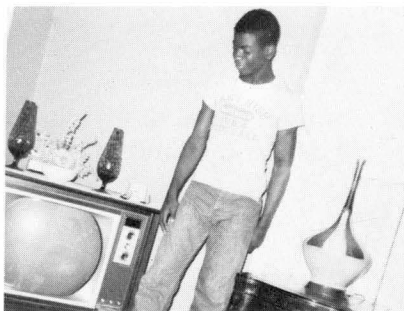
1950 First non-commercial station, WOI-TV in Ames, Iowa, is licensed.



1928 *Radio News* (magazine cover, detail)



1949 DuMont promotional photograph



1951 Coast-to-coast TV network service begins in the U.S. Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* broadcasts simultaneous live pictures of the Golden Gate and Brooklyn bridges.

Almost all television cities report a 20 to 40 percent drop in movie attendance. In non-television cities attendance remains unchanged.

The New York Public Library reports a drop in book circulation.

I Love Lucy becomes the first successful filmed (rather than live) TV series. In 1953 Lucille Ball gives birth to Desi Arnaz, Jr. The same evening viewers tune in to *I Love Lucy* to watch the TV Lucy have a baby.

First color telecast made from CBS's Grand Central Station in New York features Arthur Godfrey.

1952 DuMont and Motorola television set catalogues offer decorating tips on integrating TVs into home interior design.

First national issue of *TV Guide* is published.

Political TV ads are launched by the Democratic party.

1954 First TV dinners are introduced by Swanson.

1955 Zenith introduces the first wireless remote control device, but quickly discontinues it when the light-activated mechanism proves susceptible to stray sunlight and light beams. The remote is refined and reintroduced on a mass scale in the 1960s.

One of the most popular childrens' shows ever presented, *The Mickey Mouse Club*, goes on the air.

1956 The Republican National Convention in San Francisco provides the impetus for transcontinental broadcasts.

DuMont network, unable to obtain access to transcontinental cable, goes out of business as a television network.

Ampex Corporation introduces the first videotape recorders, radically reducing the time needed between actual events and broadcast.

1957 Singer Nat King Cole becomes the first African-American television show host, but only lasts one season because advertisers refuse sponsorship.

1959 Philco introduces the "Safari" battery-powered portable television.

1960 Gallup poll shows 28% of Americans describe watching television as their favorite way to spend an evening. By 1974 this figure will climb to 46%, but by 1986 drop to 33%.

1962 First satellite is launched, enabling live broadcasts around the world.

1965 CBS and ABC begin color programming on a regular basis.

Sony introduces the $\frac{1}{2}$ " portapak (precursor to the camcorder) and the first home videotape recorder.

1966 Color television set sales surpass black and white.

1967 Television news covers civil rights demonstrations and rioting throughout the U.S.

TV coverage of the Viet Nam War causes it to become known as the "living room war."



1955 Zenith promotional photograph

1960 Bride with RCA Victor television receiver

1975 General Electric promotional photograph



1967 Public Broadcasting System (PBS) is established with federal funds.

1968 CBS introduces demographics into audience survey research, dividing viewers into separate marketing categories by age, sex, and income.

1969 135 million people watch astronaut Neil Armstrong walk on the moon.

1972 HBO, the first successful cable network, is launched.

A report to the U.S. Surgeon General is published on the effects of television violence on children.

Pong, the first home video game, is invented by Nolan Bushnell.

1973 The Loud family of Santa Barbara lets a documentary camera crew into its home. For twelve weeks PBS chronicles the real lives of family members, ending in the parents' decision to divorce.

National Black Media Coalition is founded to advocate the rights of African-Americans in broadcasting.

1974 The three most-watched prime-time television shows feature TV

families: *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Waltons*.

First domestic U.S. satellite dish becomes available.

1975 Beta and VHS $\frac{1}{2}$ " videotape formats are introduced for consumer and industrial markets.

1977 36 million households, almost one half of the U.S. population, tune in to watch the mini-series *Roots*, which portrays the history of an African-American family from slavery through the present.

Soap, a satire of family soap operas, features one of the earliest gay TV characters played by Billy Crystal.

QUBE, the first interactive cable TV system, is tested in Columbus, Ohio.

1980 Close-captioned TV is made available for the hearing-impaired. BET (Black Entertainment Network) begins on cable television.

1981 MTV goes on the air on cable television, providing 24 hours of continuous music videos.

1982 HDTV (High Definition Television), developed in Japan, is demonstrated in the U.S.

1983 Home banking in the form of direct computer access is introduced by Chemical Bank.

1984 Sony introduces JumboTRON, a huge outdoor video display screen used in sports stadiums.

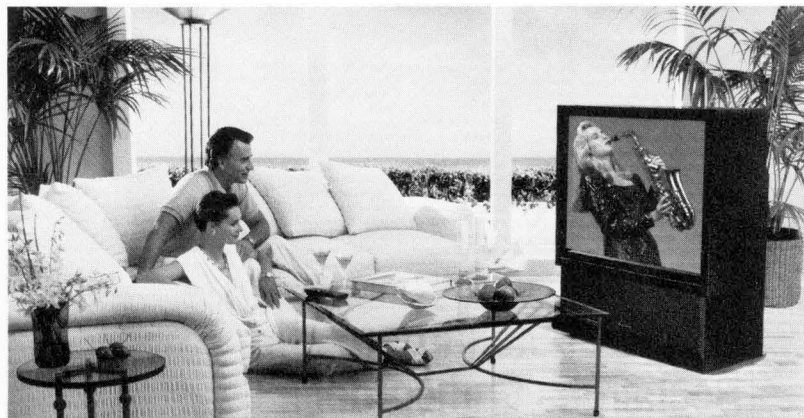
1985 *Home Shopping Club* enables viewers to purchase items directly off the TV screen.

1988 53% of U.S. homes in 23,000 communities are wired for cable television and able to access more than 30 channels.

60% of U.S. households own VCRs.

25% of people with remote controls report following two television programs at once. 13% follow three or more programs.

1990 Dramatic "reenactments" of real events become an established television genre with shows like *America's Most Wanted* and *Rescue 911*.



1989 Hitachi promotional photograph



1990 RCA promotional photograph

THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

583 Broadway New York, NY 10012

(212) 219-1222

HOURS: Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday 12 - 6 p.m.
Friday and Saturday 12 - 8 p.m.

Integrating the TV set into the home was initially an unfamiliar experience. Physically, early televisions resembled radios with small viewing screens or were hidden within cabinets to minimize disruption of home decor. Ads and owners' manuals aided the uninitiated by offering decorating tips and providing instructions on how to watch TV, including the proper viewing distance from the screen, how to light the room, and how to supervise children. As screen size increased, magazine articles fostered comparisons between the home and the theater. In the "home theater" the television set became an object of display, reflecting the owner's taste and economic status.

Today, 98% of U.S. households own one or more television sets. In the U.S. alone TV offers over 40 channels and 1,200 stations in 23,000 communities. In combination with computers and other accessories TV now performs a variety of functions from home banking to home shopping, which literally turn the home into a site of commerce. Technological advances like portable TVs, the remote control, VCRs, camcorders, and cable television have expanded viewers' choices of how, when, and where to watch, although centralized broadcast TV remains the medium's dominant mode. Some psychologists and cultural analysts now claim that viewers produce their own TV culture in the different ways they respond to what they see and in the various ways they incorporate TV into their lives. By looking at the television set this exhibition aims to understand what we make of television, rather than what television makes of us.

Susan Cahan *Education Curator*

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HOMEMADE TV Directed by Branda Miller

Homemade TV offers Museum visitors the opportunity to participate in a collectively generated video project on the uses and functions of television. Visitors will be able to borrow camcorders and make their own videotapes in the exhibition, exploring how they incorporate the TV set into their lives and what television means to them. Camcorders are available during all Museum hours on a first come, first serve basis.

Hands-on editing sessions will be conducted every Sunday from 1:00 - 5:00 p.m. (except September 30 and November 11). These sessions will reveal the abstract, constructed nature of the television image. Anyone interested in participating or observing is invited to attend. The tapes edited in these sessions will be shown in the exhibition. Hands-on editing sessions require advance registration. Please inquire at the *Homemade TV* desk in the exhibition.

GROUP VISITS

Guided group visits are available for adults and for students grades 7 through 12. For more information call Phyllis Gilbert, Docent and Group Tour Coordinator, at (212) 219-1222.

TEACHER AND STUDENT WORKSHOP

TV or Not TV: Perceptions of Television within the Home, Family, and School

Wednesday, October 10, 4 - 5:30 p.m.

For more information or to register please call the Education Department at (212) 219-1222.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

The book, *From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set*, edited by Matthew Geller and Reese Williams, and published in conjunction with the exhibition, is available at the Museum's Admissions Desk.

For further reading on the social history of television, please consult the Museum's Soho Center Library.